

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002598

SIPDIS

NSC FOR CBARTON
USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD
USAID FOR DCHA/OTI RPORTER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/12/2014
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#) [OAS](#)
SUBJECT: LOOKING TOWARD REFERENDUM DAY

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASON 1.5 (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) On August 15, Venezuelans will take a decisive step in finding a peaceful, democratic electoral solution to the country's political crisis. Nearly 15 months since the signing of the OAS agreement, Venezuelans will say whether President Hugo Chavez stays or goes. The CNE appears ready for the vote, and the competing sides had their final rallies August 12. Some doubts about the National Electoral Council (CNE)'s ability to conduct an impartial recall vote persist, and the opposition and government's strong belief in the polls will likely lead to accusations of fraud. The ruling of the international observers will be key. The streets are rife with rumors, some likely based on bravado, that opposition and government supporters are planning violence to begin as early as the afternoon of August 15 before the polls close. In addition to violence, the capacity of the voting and fingerprint machines, degree of transparency, and the weather will be important factors in determining the outcome of the referendum and the willingness of either side to accept the results. Only preliminary results are expected August 15. End summary.

Referendum Day

2. (C) The polls will open on August 15 at 6 am and will remain open until 4 pm, although all who are in line by that time will be able to vote. President Chavez and opposition leaders have told their supporters to line up as early as possible and are organizing caravans to ensure that voters get to the correct polling stations. Pollsters and political party leaders we have talked to expect at least a 70 percent turnout. Some opposition leaders also say party "brigades" will be out in force to prevent and/or counter anticipated voter intimidation by the government. While the majority of the vote will be automated, due in part to the last minute reassignment of some voters to polling centers, approximately 30 percent of the vote will be manual as well. International Observers will be out nationwide, as well as, in National Electoral Council (CNE) headquarters when the votes are transmitted. The CNE says they will be able to announce the results within 3 hours after the polls close. OAS electoral mission head Edgardo Reis says that while the CNE prohibits taking a quick count, they will take an informal sample of the results that they will check against the formal results. To reduce charges of fraud and the possibility of widespread violence, the CNE will have to announce the results of the referendum Sunday night, the Carter Center and OAS will have to find the process completely transparent, and the winner will need a large margin of victory.

3. (C) The campaign period ends at midnight on August 12 with each party sponsoring their final rallies in which they promise the largest turnout of the campaign season. The Chavistas have overwhelmed the campaign period so far using government money to print signs plastered all over cities, and routine presidential addresses that all television stations were required to broadcast. In comparison, the opposition's campaign was late to bloom and relied in some cases more on supporters painting their cars with "SI" instead of the placards, due in part to the reluctance of some businessmen to give to the opposition's cause. The opposition campaign coordinators also sponsored local community meetings to get out the vote. All media outlets showed government and opposition advertisements, according to CNE regulations. Television shows, including local soap operas, also had themes that supported, respectively, the opposition and government positions.

What Could go Wrong

14. (C) Despite CNE demonstrations of the fingerprint and voting machines, we remain concerned that the use of two new technologies for such an important vote could cause unforeseen technical problems that delay the vote and prompt accusations of fraud and/or violence. Technical experts tell us the fingerprint machines will take 5 to 30 seconds to process each voter. If, as predicted, some 9.8 million people turn out to vote, this would present a real challenge to the new system and cause significant delays that could turn off some potential voters, particularly if it rains, as the weather forecast predicts. These problems will also lend themselves to allegations of irregularities and fraud.

15. (C) Although mid-July Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner poll suggests that a slim majority of voters believe their vote will be secret, there are fears that votes will not be counted correctly or that they will somehow be manipulated during transmission to the CNE. There is a concern that if the government, either as a result of exit polls or advanced warning from the CNE, realizes it is losing, it may order the sabotage of the voting system or call on supporters to cause violence (to deter other voters and/or suspend the vote) that will then be blamed on the opposition. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel has already accused the opposition of planning "acts of terrorism" and the continuing mystery of missing C4 and other explosives fuels this rumor among opposition supporters. Others predict violence will occur August 16 as the winners take revenge against the losers. In this scenario, opposition supporters believe the military and international community will intervene and ask Chavez to step down.

Comment

16. (C) Both sides have had over a year to plead their case to the people and now is the hour of the Venezuelan people to decide who they want to govern them. By now everyone has made up their minds if they will vote and for whom they will vote. The belief that the vote is secret may be the ultimate swing factor. Given the level of distrust the political parties have for each other and the CNE, international observation will be the key to keeping the process on track and improving the chances that the loser will accept the results.

Shapiro

NNNN
2004CARACA02598 - CONFIDENTIAL